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ABSTRACT

Although, theoretically, an organizational vision can unite school-community members, it can also destroy organizational culture without the consensus of those members. This publication offers guidelines for creating a collaborative vision--one that gives all members the opportunity to help create the vision. Each school should choose a strategy that conforms to its own particular style of decision making and the level of maturity of its work culture. Some overall guidelines include the following: (1) involve all stakeholders; (2) follow your dreams; (3) inform your ideals with data--commit to continual learning; (4) assign tasks to work teams; (5) live the vision; (6) tap the power of symbols to communicate the vision; and (7) commit to an ongoing process. The principal should take time to thoroughly understand the school culture; facilitate the school vision (rather than push one's own); integrate the vision with external demands; and learn from failure. (LMI)

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Transforming a School's Culture Through Shared Vision

by Stuart C. Smith and Stephen Stolp

"It is not, as we commonly believe, that the past plus the present form our vision of the future; rather the past plus our vision of the future form the present."

Phillip Schlechty

Principal Jack Thomas has a vision of what he wants Mount Day Elementary School to look like in five years. The vision includes higher student achievement, increased teacher motivation, and more parent involvement. Thomas is committed to perfecting a school culture that is both efficient and productive. In the past, Mount Day has suffered from high student dropout rates and increased numbers of burned-out teachers. Class sizes grow larger each year, but the thin, windowless hallways provide no relief for students or staff.

Low mileage for midforties, Thomas is the picture of professionalism. He arrives each morning at 6:00 a.m. in a suit, tie, and cupped Wing Tips. Teachers and office staff address him as "Jack," but in front of students he is always "Mr. Thomas" or "Principal Thomas." "The idea," says Jack, "is to create an atmo-

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sphere of mutual respect." To that end, Principal Thomas spends much of his time developing new programs that promote his vision of school success. That vision includes achievement, productivity, staff efficiency, and goal-setting in an environment of respect and consideration for others.

Upon the recommendation of a colleague, Principal Thomas instituted a program designed to boost student morale. The program was called "Day Lights," and its purpose was to recognize the "bright moments" in a student's day at Mount Day Elementary. Awards were given to students by teachers or other staff members any time the children initiated behavior that promoted a more positive school culture or climate. A six-page handout and a weekly staff meeting were devoted solely to the Day Lights program. The awards were intended to promote Principal Thomas's vision of higher achievement, respect, and productivity at school.

Teachers were required to keep track of student awards. For each ten awards, a letter was sent to parents congratulating them on their student's outstanding behavior. Each day became a new challenge for staff, as they had to mark, count, calculate, and recognize new Day Lights winners. The process became so labor intensive that teachers complained: "It took more time to calculate the stupid awards than to prepare for a week of class."

Eventually, the new program failed. But it failed only after three months of contentious debate about the program between the principal and staff. Staff meetings flared with comments about the workload and questions about the real benefit to students. Teachers expressed anger; Principal Thomas felt unsupported; and in the end parents and students wondered what the point was of the Day Lights program. But perhaps the biggest loser was the school's culture. It seemed to suffer the most because Jack Thomas failed to recognize that a vision must be shared by all members of the organization.

Principal Thomas discovered that although theoretically an organizational vision can bind people together, without consensus a vision can also destroy organizational culture. Thomas was blinded by what he thought school should look like. In the process, the school culture turned hostile and unproductive, just the opposite of what the principal intended.

This fictitious example illustrates the most important lesson of change in any school culture: The creation of a school's vision must be a collaborative activity. The crucial question, says Michael G. Fullan (1992), dean of education at the University of Toronto, is "Whose vision is it?" "Principals," he says, "are blinded by their own vision when they feel they must manipulate the teachers and the school culture to conform to it." A more useful approach is to make "vision building a collective exercise."

Creating Shared Responsibility

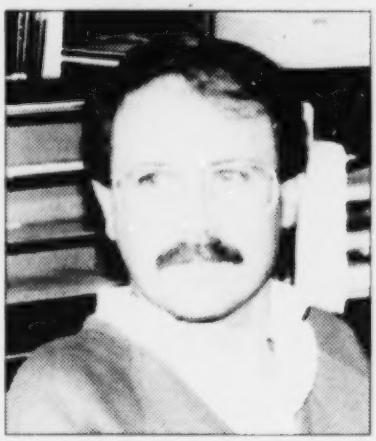
As Fullan points out, the process of negotiating a shared vision of school culture should be

collaborative, more than just cooperative. The idea isn't to make staff members cooperate with the principal's vision; rather, it is to give all members of the organization the opportunity to help create the vision. In this way, everyone shares the responsibility for culture building.

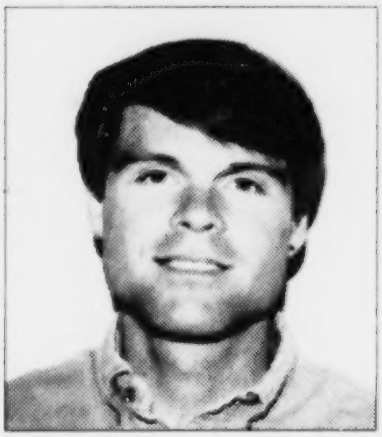
The vision is what communicates to members of the work group what is worth doing and how.

The principles encompassed in a vision provide the most positive direction and energy for an organization when they are shared by the work group. Cunningham and Gresso (1993) include the "visionary model of planning" as one of the correlates of an effective culture. They say "the shared vision serves as the bonding agent within the culture." It is the glue that holds together and unifies the aspirations, commitments, and interests of the organization's members around common themes and shared purposes. The vision is what communicates to members of the work group what is worth doing and how. Obviously, the more committed members are to the vision, the harder they will work together to attain the vision.

Paradoxically, the vision binds together and solidifies the work culture, giving it purpose and unity, but the vision is also the product of an effective work culture. To create a vision, the organization's members must listen to one another, feel empowered to change the organization, have confidence in their ability to improve their performance, think critically and gather data about where the organization is at present, and hold strong convictions about the ideals that should guide their work in the future. These are all characteristics of an effective work culture. Such a culture is fertile soil for the continual generation and germination of new ideas about what the organization can accomplish. Indeed, the power of the vision-building process derives from the fact that it is ongoing; it is the way a productive work group continually challenges itself to recreate the future—and therefore change the present.



Stuart C. Smith



Stephen Stolp

This article is excerpted from *Transforming School Culture: Stories, Symbols, Values, and the Leader's Role*, by Stephen Stolp and Stuart C. Smith. Eugene, Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, forthcoming. Smith is the Clearinghouse's associate director for publications and editor of the Oregon School Study Council. Stolp is a research analyst and writer who received his doctor's degree in teacher education from the University of Oregon in 1993.

Guidelines for Creating a Vision

There is no one particular strategy or set of steps every school should take to define its vision. Shoes come in different sizes, and so do vision-creating processes. The strategy each school chooses will conform to its own particular style of decision-making and the level of maturity of its work culture. If staff members are not used to working as a team, for example, some preliminary effort will probably have to be devoted to training in group-process skills. Rather than prescribe one size to fit all, we offer the following principles to guide the vision-building process.

1. *Involve all stakeholders.* The strength of a work culture is

measured by the degree to which all members of the work team believe in and strive to achieve the organization's vision. For this reason, the vision-building process is also a community-building process. When the principal and all teachers and other staff members share with one another their dreams and ideals and begin to trust one another, they forge a bond that will withstand the trials they will encounter in putting their vision into practice.

2. *Follow your dreams.* The present reality may be comfortable or it may be intolerable. Complacency is the enemy of inspiration just as frustration and anger make us too willing to welcome change of any kind. A vision captures an ideal state of affairs. It attracts and inspires us precisely because it is truly what we long for, what promises to yield the greatest sense of fulfillment.

3. *Inform your ideals with data; commit to continual learning.* Many vision-building teams conduct research to gain a more exact understanding of what an effective school looks like. Equally important is ongoing professional development to help staff members sharpen their instructional skills and learn about school-improvement strategies. Employees whose knowledge and skills are constantly improving more eagerly face the challenges of the future.

4. *Assign tasks to work teams.* Everyone participates equally in definition of the vision, but the steps of implementation can be delegated to smaller groups. For example, a school planning team could be charged with writing the vision statement that expresses the community's ideals. That or another team could then develop a first-year plan of action. Other groups could plan needed professional development and devise strategies for any major changes, such as adoption of a new curriculum.

5. *Live the vision.* As Cunningham and Gresso say, "If the vision needs to be written in order to be communicated, there is no shared vision." The vision affects the life of the school only when its ideals are internalized, when it becomes written in people's hearts and minds. These two authors write:

> As the mission becomes a part of the work culture, the work group begins to operate in a highly aligned manner. The group knows what needs to be done and can sense when convergence and synergy is being achieved. Employees talk until they can each tell they are seeing things in the same way. There is little need for formal statements of agreement, as agreement is understood. At this point, the work culture has achieved a deep level of understanding that will propagate throughout the organization.

6. *Tap the power of symbols to communicate the vision.* Stories, logos, mottos, meaningful names for physical features (How about "Commitment Courtyard," "Attitude Alley"?), murals, assemblies, and symbolic actions by key personnel are valuable devices for drawing attention to the school's core values. Beware, however, of using symbols in an advertising blitz to persuade people to think or act differently. To inspire allegiance to a vision, symbols must remind people of values they already believe in, by virtue of having been involved in the definition of the school's vision.

7. *Commit to an ongoing process.* Creating a vision within an organization is not a static event, because people and institutions change. As Peter Senge (1990) notes, "At any one point there will be a particular image of the future that is predominant, but that image will evolve." Vision-building is a never-ending process of incremental adjustments. If a school expresses its vision as a five-year projection into the future, then each year or at least every other year the personnel will revise their vision on the basis of current knowledge and aspirations.

Vision-building is a never-ending process of incremental adjustments.

The Principal's Role

No one should fault a principal for arriving at a school with a preconceived vision of what that school ought to become. After all, the principal's strongly held convictions about educational goals and outcomes probably figured heavily in the superintendent's decision to assign the principal to that school. The question for the principal now becomes How much should I push my own vision?

We suggest that principals who are in this situation listen to the advice of one of their colleagues. Nancy Wilson, a principal of fifteen years, at the time of this writing assigned to Boekman Creek Elementary School in Wilsonville, Oregon, suggests that the best way to approach changes in school culture initially is to "do nothing." Her advice is to "talk to teachers, talk to staff, and learn something about the culture you're in first." Take time to thoroughly understand the organization. Then and only then, a principal can begin to approach change by empowering staff and negotiating a shared vision.

If a leader starts with a preconceived vision, he or she should proceed with extreme caution. As a person in a position of power, the principal may place students and staff members in an uncomfortable position. They may feel an obligation to conform to the principal's wishes. The participants may see disagreement as a threat to job security or personal status.

Facilitating the Vision Process

A principal's reticence to propose his or her own vision is wise for the reason we have stressed throughout this chapter: For any vision, no matter who proposes it, to make a difference, all members of the work group must rally around it. A principal who appreciates the need for vision to drive a strong work culture knows that the power of a vision comes not just from the soundness of the ideas specified in it but from the unity of purpose that is achieved when all members believe in, claim as their own, and act on that vision.

As facilitator, the principal communicates trust that all members of the school community are as committed to excellence as he or she is.

In other words, there are many paths to excellence; what is indispensable is teamwork once a particular path has been chosen. Viewed in this light, the principal's role is best seen not as originator of the vision but as facilitator of the vision.

Another way to put it is that the principal's personal vision ought simply to be that everyone in the school *agree* on a vision. Rather than control the specifics of the vision, the principal facilitates the process by which all teachers, aides, office staff, custodians, parents, and students decide on their common vision. The leader's role is to smooth the way and garner the support and resources for such a consensus to be realized.

The principal must have the same priorities as a successful football coach, who knows that winning games depends less on whether the offense lines up in the wishbone or pro-set formation than on how thoroughly the players understand the type of offense that is used and play effectively as a team. The difference is that a football coach chooses the type of offense and then on the practice field instills teamwork, whereas the principal involves everyone in the choice because, in a school, it is the only way to build a team. As facilitator, the principal communicates trust that all members of the school community are as committed to excellence as he or she is.

Perhaps the best way to begin is to encourage an atmosphere where staff and students feel comfortable offering visionary ideas. Principal Bob Anderson of North Eugene High School does that by creating a safe environment where staff feel inclined to participate. According to Lynn Balster Liontos (1993), he does this through:

> (1) his strong sense of caring, (2) his openness and approachability, (3) his ability to let people know that it's okay to disagree with him, (4) his encouragement of risk-taking and trying new ideas, (5) his ability to allow people to feel it's okay to make mistakes or fail, and (6) his strong support for staff.

Many times students and staff remain outside the creative process. Bob Anderson demonstrates that by paying attention to the values and interests of all members of the organization, the principal can better facilitate a shared vision.

Blending Internal and External Demands

Culture goes beyond the front doors of the school. In the same sense, visions are not confined to what happens in classrooms, hallways, and front offices. A school's vision must satisfy a

variety of external demands, such as meeting the academic goals of the school district, responding to community needs and parent requests, and complying with state and federal legal requirements.

What a vision offers is a beacon to guide the leader and the school to rediscover their way once it has been lost.

These outside influences all play a role in shaping the school's vision, with a force that is at least equal to the internal needs of the educational environment that center on student and staff relationships. The principal is in the best position to orchestrate the blending of these various internal and external elements into a coherent and accepted shared vision.

Learning from Failure

Possibly the toughest job for any leader is admitting failure. If Principal Jack Thomas had learned this lesson before initiating his Day Lights program, he probably would have had more success at Mount Day Elementary. Learning from failure is an act of personal reflection. An administrator should always consider how his or her actions affect the current organizational culture. Several important questions arise: How does the process of change influence others? Where does the principal or administrator fit into the process? What are all the possible outcomes of organizational change? and What happens when irreconcilable differences arise? Reflecting on these questions may be the most important task of a successful leader of change.

When changes undertaken to improve a school's culture do not have their intended result, what is a leader to do? Stop, reevaluate, and try again is certainly one option. But the solution may be as simple as helping people adjust to the change with some words of encouragement. In situations where consensus is unattainable, the leader may resort to cultivating the value of peaceful coexistence. Rather than force agreement, sometimes it is best to acknowledge that people may not share the same values but still can find a way to work together harmoniously.

Failure of one kind or another is an inevitable part of life. What a vision offers is a beacon to guide the leader and the school to rediscover their way once it has been lost. And once the values expressed in the vision permeate the organizational culture, the likelihood of failure diminishes, as the members' actions become aligned with the vision.

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